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LaSalle and the Griffon



THE LAUNCHING OF THE GRIFFON.

From Hennepin's Voyage ou Nouvelle découverte dans l'Amerique.

HISTORICAL PAPER

DELIVERED

BY C. M. BURTON,

BEFORE THE

SOCIETY OF COLONIAL WARS

OF THE

STATE OF MICHIGAN.

AT A SOCIAL COURT HELD AT THE RESIDENCE OF
GOVERNOR THEODORE H. EATON,
JANUARY TWENTY-SIXTH,
NINETEEN HUNDRED AND TWO.



1903.

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LaSALLE AND THE GRIFFON.

BY C. M. BURTON.

ON the 26th day of January, 1679, was laid the keel of the Griffon, the first sail vessel on Lake Erie, and the last sail vessel built and sailed on this lake for more than half a century. Some question has been raised as to the exact location of the shipyard of the Griffon, but it is sufficient for us to know that it was located on the Niagara River, between the Falls and the present City of Buffalo, probably on the eastern side of the river, but possibly on the Canadian side.

René Robert Cavelier, commonly known by the name of LaSalle, which was the name of his ancestral estate in France, came to America in 1666, at the age of 23 years. He early evinced a desire to explore the western country, along lines that were entirely unknown at that date.

LaSalle in his youth had studied for the priesthood, but the education obtained in his preparatory studies directed his mind along the lines of liberal thought, then quite prevalent in France, and he soon concluded that he was not fitted for the ministry, and so turned his attention to more worldly affairs.

The Society of Jesus, commonly called the Jesuits, was very powerful both in France and in Canada at this time, and its influence with the Court party and constant attempts to control the political affairs of the new country had raised against it a host of enemies.

Governor Frontenac was the most important of the enemies of this Order in New France, but there were many others of lesser note then, and in after times, as LaSalle, Cadillac, and all of the priests of the other religious orders, who were outspoken in their opposition and suffered in consequence.

In some ways Frontenac and LaSalle were alike. Both zealous in their love for their mother country, and anxious that its unknown territory should be explored and reduced to a proper subjection. Both decidedly opposed to the Jesuits, and determined that they would not be subject to the rulings of the Order. Both indefatigable in the work in which they were engaged, and determined to succeed at all hazards. So it happened that these two men fell to liking each other, and their contact was a matter of benefit to both.

A fort had been erected upon the north shore of Lake Ontario, which LaSalle obtained as a grant from the King of France, and with the grant he obtained the privilege of founding there a colony to be administered to by a Recollet Friar. The same plan was followed many years later by Cadillac in the founding of our own City of Detroit, and with a like result, in that it brought down upon the head of each the wrath of the Order of Jesuits, then the most powerful organization in the world.

It was hard for either man to stand up in opposition to this Order, and the troubles and trials of each may largely be laid to the opposition of this enemy.

LaSalle had conceived the idea that by progressing westward along the line of the St. Lawrence River, and beyond, he would ultimately discover a passage that would lead to China, and, it is said, that

this idea, promulgated at this time to a horde of unbelievers, was scoffed at and ridiculed to so great an extent that the LaChine Rapids in the River St. Lawrence were so named in derision of LaSalle's contemplated expedition to China through those waters.

The building of Fort Frontenac, at Kingston, was in opposition to the wishes of the Iroquois Indians, with whom the French could never keep on friendly terms, and they desired its destruction. It was not destroyed, but it did not prosper, and it was not long before LaSalle asked permission to leave it, and to work on further, into the unknown country in his explorations.

In 1678 he obtained permission to explore the western country, and began making preparations for the journey.

We now know that as early as 1656, and possibly much earlier, certain persons had passed around Lakes Erie, St. Clair, and Huron, and through the Detroit River, and had explored the same sufficiently to make a fairly accurate map of the waters, and the adjacent land. This map had been published in Paris, by the official geographer, and copies of it were quite extensively circulated. These maps show that there were Jesuit missions scattered all over the lower portion of Canada, between the Detroit River and Lake Ontario, but they do not show that the explorers knew of the Falls of Niagara, or that there was any connection between Lakes Erie and Ontario.

It is fair to suppose that LaSalle knew of the existence of these maps, for they were printed in France and sold publicly. Their existence has always been known to students, but little attention

to them was paid by Windsor, Frost, Bancroft, or Parkman, and no mention is made of them by any of these writers to prove the early exploration of the western country.

In 1669 LaSalle had accompanied the two priests, Dollier de Casson and de Galinee, as far as the Falls of Niagara on their trip through the Great Lakes, but at this point he had returned to Montreal, and they had proceeded on their journey and had made a map of their explorations, showing the Detroit River, but the map had not, in 1678, been published, and was not published for many years, though LaSalle may have seen the original draft.

So far as can be ascertained, LaSalle did not know how large Lake Erie was, or where a voyage would lead to, if once started upon its waters.

He built a brigantine of ten tons on Lake Ontario in 1678, and in order to extend his operations in trading and exploring further west, he planned to build a larger vessel above the Falls on Lake Erie.

His chief companions were Henry DeTonty, he of the iron hand; LaMothe de Lussiere, who, I believe, was a near relative of our own Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, and Father Louis Hennepin. Father Hennepin was a Recollet priest, at that time an intimate friend of the great explorer, and one of the recorders of the events of this occasion. The brigantine was employed to convey materials from Montreal for the purpose of building the new boat, and a tramway was built to convey the heavy materials up the elevation between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. On the 26th of January, 1679, the keel of the boat was laid, and men worked diligently to complete the vessel and get it launched, lest it should be destroyed by the Iroquois, who had threatened to burn it. The loss

of a part of the materials for the new boat required the return of LaSalle to Fort Frontenac and Montreal for new supplies, and subsequently Hennepin also returned to Fort Frontenac. In the meantime the work on the boat progressed, and in May it was launched and named the Griffon. It sailed part way up the Niagara River, but did not ascend the Rapids, and rode at anchor until the arrival of LaSalle, Hennepin, and LaForest. With the arrival of these men the heavy materials, anchors, cannon, munitions, and provisions were carried over the portage and around the Falls. Several times the sails were hoisted and the Griffon attempted to ascend the Rapids to the lake proper, but every attempt was a failure. At length, however, towards the end of July, or the first of August, 1679, a propitious breeze, with the aid of the land force towing the boat, carried it through the Rapids, and they were upon the great inland sea.

Tonty, in his narrative of the events of this period, says that just before the Griffon succeeded in mounting the Rapids of the Niagara, he, with five men, was sent forward to the mouth of the Detroit River, there to join fourteen Frenchmen who had already been sent to the place. This would indicate a knowledge on the part of LaSalle of the existence of the Detroit River and the topography of the country, though this information might have been obtained from Joliet, who had come down from Detroit River and met the party of LaSalle at their stopping place at the Niagara, while the Griffon was being built, or it might have been obtained from either of the maps before mentioned. Tonty arrived at his destination on the 20th of August, having set out on the 22d of July. Here he awaited the coming of LaSalle and

Hennepin, with their companions on the Griffon, who had started on the 7th of August, and upon their arrival the entire party embarked and proceeded up the river to Lake Huron. Tonty makes no mention of Lake Ste. Claire.

Hennepin's account of the Detroit River is very interesting, and it is apparent that the company was surprised and pleased with the prospect of the country. Vast prairies, which stretched as far as the eye could see, and bordered by hills covered with vines and orchards of fruit trees, with groves and high forest trees. On the banks of the river were quantities of deer, stags, kids, bears, not wild, but easy to catch, more delicious to eat than the fresh pork of Europe. They also found wild hens and swans in great quantities. They covered the high sides of their vessel with the skins of the deer they killed in the chase. As they ascended the river they found the banks covered with forests of walnut, chestnut, plum and pear trees, and wild grapes, from which they made a little wine.

It seems almost with prophetic pen that Father Hennepin wrote on this occasion: "Those who will have the good fortune one day to possess the lands of this agreeable and fertile Detroit will bless those who have made smooth the road and who have traversed Lake Erie through more than a hundred leagues of unknown navigation."

Hennepin proposed to LaSalle to found an establishment at the Detroit, he was so greatly pleased with its location and prospects, but LaSalle had other objects in view than stopping when his journey had but just begun, and so he proceeded.

It was on the 11th day of August, 1679, that they entered the Detroit River, and the next day they

reached a small lake, which, in honor of the Saint's day of August 12th, they named Lake Ste. Claire. Passing into Lake Huron they crossed the lake under many difficulties and through severe storms, and landed at Michilimackinac. The party proceeded to Green Bay, where the Griffon was loaded with furs, and dispatched on her return trip. On the 18th of September the loaded Griffon sailed for Niagara, but without LaSalle, Hennepin, or Tonty. She was wrecked a short time afterwards, but in what spot was never clearly ascertained. Thus begun and ended the sail navigation of the Great Western Lakes by the French.

The quarrel between the French and Iroquois lasted for some years, and the French did not dare undertake any improvements along the border of Lake Erie. Other explorers occasionally passed along the shores of Lake Erie and entered the upper lakes, but they used only the canoes and larger batteaux. The French were in possession of the country and claimed to own it, though the English would not acquiesce in their claim, and in 1689 sent a detachment of troops under two officers, McGregor and Rosebloom, to explore and take possession of the upper country in the name of Great Britain. The Englishmen were captured on Lake Huron and stripped of everything and sent to Montreal.

Nearly every advance into the western country was made on a road leading northwest from Montreal, along the Ottawa River to Lake Nipissing, and from that lake to the Georgian Bay. A post that was called Detroit, and which was located near the entrance of Lake Huron, on the banks of the River St. Clair, was destroyed by orders of the French Government in 1688 (August 27), and from that

date until the founding of Detroit, in 1701, by Cadillac, the French held actual possession on the lakes only of the upper country, though they claimed possession of the entire lake region. In 1702 Cadillac's wife made a trip through Lake Ontario, around the Falls of Niagara, and along the shores of Lake Erie to Detroit, and thereafter this was the usual route for traders and voyagers. It was sixty years more before the English came to Detroit as conquerors, and then Robert Rogers, the New England Ranger, came with his companies of troops to take possession of the place in the name of the English Government. He, too, came with canoes and batteaux, for there were no sail vessels in existence. The coming of the English marks an era in the progress of lake navigation, for the very next year, 1761, two sail vessels were built on the Niagara River for use on Lake Erie.

Before the building of any vessels, Major Walters, who was in charge of Niagara in 1760, reported that he was afraid sloops would not answer on Lake Erie, for the reason that there were no harbors, nor could such vessels get near enough to shore, owing to shoal water. He thought shallops and batteaux would be more serviceable. Notwithstanding this discouragement, in the following year Lieutenant Robertson arrived at Niagara to build lake vessels, and that year a Mr. Theis built two vessels on an island in the Niagara River for service on Lakes Erie and Huron, and as far as Lake Superior. One was a schooner drawing seven feet loaded, and carrying six guns, to be commanded by Lieutenant Robertson of Montgomery's Regiment, and the other, a sloop to carry ten guns. I do not know these boats by name, that is, not so as to be able to identify them, but the

“Serpent,” “Beaver,” “Charlotte,” “Gladwin,” “Victory,” and “Boston” appeared at about this time.

These vessels played an important part in the siege of Detroit, and it is largely owing to the assistance received from them that Major Gladwin was enabled to withstand the attacks of the Indians until they were exhausted and discouraged. Major Gladwin himself sailed from Detroit on the 30th of August, 1764, on the schooner Victory. Almost on the same day Captain John Montresor explored the River Rouge, four miles from its mouth, to find a proper location for wintering vessels. In this year, also, men were set at work on Ile au Cochon, our Belle Isle Park, cutting timber for two scows to be used for bringing stone and other materials to the village. These boats were 70 feet long and 18 feet broad, capable of carrying 25 tons.

The new coming English and American citizens had taken nearly exclusive control of the carrying trade, and it increased very rapidly. It was estimated that in 1764 there were 180 boats employed in the Indian trade at Detroit, and that the trade amounted to £100,000 per annum, but it must be understood that most of these boats were small, for the larger sail vessels did not increase in number very rapidly. The first of the sail vessels were owned by the Government, and were used for military purposes, though they brought up freight when not otherwise employed. The British officials seemed unwilling to allow individuals to engage in the business. No serious fault was found with this procedure for many years. A shipyard was built at the water's edge at the foot of Woodward avenue, extending some distance easterly from this point, and here some buildings were erected for the officers and

men engaged in the naval department, and a force of men was kept employed during the Revolutionary War.

The Government appointed Alexander Grant, a Detroit citizen, whose family afterwards resided at Grosse Pointe, and who was master of the Brunswick, commodore of the lakes, to have general charge of the lake marine. Grant was a man of considerable importance, a member of the privy council, and at one time president of Upper Canada Parliament. He held the office of commodore for many years, and during the period the shipping business thrived. I believe that private ownership of vessels began after the French war was ended, but that during the Revolution all vessels were either owned or controlled by the British Government.

During British control there were many more boats put on the lakes; the Angelica, Adventurer, Athabaska, Annette, Chippewa, Enterprise, Dunmore, Detroit, Faith, Felicite, Good Intent, Gage, Hope, Harlequin, Hunter, Nancy, Ottawa, Saginah, Speedwell, Weasel, Wyandotte, and Welcome, and perhaps others. Many Detroit merchants were interested in or owned vessels for their private business, but the largest single vessel owner was the Northwest Company, of which McTavish, Frobisher & Co., of Montreal, were the representatives, and Angus McIntosh and John Askin the local agents and contractors. A number of the boats above named belonged to this company.

After the War of the Revolution was ended, the British still retained possession of Detroit, and of the lakes, in utter disregard of the terms of the treaty of 1783, and still carried the trade of all the upper lake regions to Niagara, Montreal and Quebec. They

stationed armed vessels all along the west end of Lake Erie, to prevent succors and assistance from reaching General Wayne, on his progress northward, that ended in the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794. Two years later the lake posts were abandoned by British troops, and the reign of the Republic began.

Concerning the cost of building boats during this period, little can be determined at this distance of time, but I have in my possession the account of Peter Curry for building and managing the sloop Detroit from 1792 to 1796, and I have copied the items merely as a matter of curiosity. Peter Curry was the owner of a large tract of land on the River Rouge, adjoining the parcel officially known as the Ship Yard Tract (Woodmere Cemetery), and situated on the southerly side of Fort street. This was the shipyard for this part of the country, for here the ship timbers could readily be obtained, and the River Rouge was always navigable and never subject to be disturbed by storms. The parcel of land next below Mr. Curry's was owned by McTavish, Frobisher & Co., the representatives of the Northwest Company, and here their vessels were made, repaired and stored when not in use.

The account with the sloop Detroit is as follows:

1792.	To services in conducting and building the sloop, from November 8, 1792, to May 18, 1793, 192 days at 11/-.....	£ 105-12-00
	To allowance for 91¼ gals. rum while building the sloop	18- 5-00
	To pay, as master, from May 19, 1793, to Dec. 8, 1793, 6 months, 21 days, at £12 per month	80- 8-00
1793.	To primage on £1556-15-4 at 2½%.....	38-18- 4
	To paid Superintendent's fees	12- 2-10
	To one year's pay as master of the Detroit.	160- 0-00

1794.	To primage on £954-9-10 at $2\frac{1}{2}\%$	23-17- 3
	To paid Superintendent's fees	11-18- 0
	To pay as master, 6 months, 28 days, at £160 per year	92- 8-10½
1795.	To primage for one year.....	8- 8-10½
1796.	To paid Superintendent's fees.....	4- 8-10½
	To a chest of tools used in building vessel.	9- 6- 8
	To 377 mos. allowance of tea, for use of the cabin, 1 lb. per mo., 12/-.....	22-10-00
	To 377 mos. allowance of loaf sugar for cabin, at 4 lbs. per mo., 4/-.....	30-10-00
	To transportation of merchandise in the cabin	100-10-00
	Total, N. Y. Currency	£945- 5- 8½

The bill is instructive in showing the rapid decline of the Canadian carrying trade, for with the end of the account in 1796 came the American occupation of the lake ports, and the carrying trade was at once diverted to the American ports in American boats. The trade to Montreal and Quebec was nearly at an end, and Buffalo, Albany, and New York were the eastern trading posts.

The schooner Washington was the first American vessel on Lake Erie, in 1797, but others soon appeared and many of those formerly designated as Canadian craft became Americanized. The new vessels that appeared were the Montreal, Rover, Ranger, Cincinnati, Swan, Adams, Wilkinson. The earliest return of duties received on American vessels that I have in my possession is for the year 1800. There were only four vessels, the schooners Thames, Montreal, and Wilkinson, and the sloop Washington, registered. All of these sailed from Port Erie, Canada, to Detroit, and all were British except the Wilkinson. The total tonnage was 255, and the total duties collected was \$15.30. The next year the tonnage had increased to 330, and the duties to \$25.22. In 1802 the tonnage was 497, and the duties \$29.83, and every vessel belonged to American citizens.

Shortly after the outbreak of the War of 1812, the British captured Detroit and became virtual masters of the lakes. There were no battles on the water until the Battle of Lake Erie, September 10th, 1813, and Detroit still held the British army. The vessels in this battle were the Detroit, Chippewa, Hunter, Queen Charlotte, Lady Prevost, and Little Belt, on the side of Great Britain, and the Lawrence, Scorpion, Ariel, Caledonia, Niagara, Somers, Porcupine, and Trippe, under Commodore Perry. This was the only naval battle that ever took place on the western waters, and no better description of its result can be written than that dispatched by Oliver Hazard Perry to General William Henry Harrison:

“Dear General:—We have met the enemy and they are ours; two ships, two brigs, one schooner, and one sloop.”

The battle was so disastrous to British hopes and expectations that they despaired of longer retaining Detroit, and that place was evacuated within a short time, and the Battle of the Thames and defeat of Proctor soon followed. The war ended with the beginning of 1815, and an era of hard work and prosperity followed.

Steam navigation had already been tried on Lake Champlain, and in 1817 a steamer appeared on Lake Ontario. The Walk-in-the-Water, the first steamboat on Lake Erie, was built at Black Rock, a few miles below Buffalo.

It is a fact worthy of notice that the Niagara River has been the shipyard for the commencement of navigation at the three epochs of marine ship building. It was on that river that the Griffon first floated. It was there also that the Beaver and Gladwin were launched, eighty years later, the first vessel

made by Englishmen, and again after an interval of nearly sixty years more the forerunner of our vast navy of lake carriers slid from its stays into the waters of the Niagara on Thursday, May 28th, 1818.

As much difficulty was experienced in getting the Walk-in-the-Water into the waters of Lake Erie as there had been 129 years before in getting the Grifon through the same channel. The engine was not powerful enough to crowd the boat through the rapid current of the river, and after several days spent in making attempts, twelve yoke of cattle were attached to a long hawser, and by the aid of this new power, the "horned breeze," the boat was finally brought into the calmer waters of the lake.

This steamer reached Detroit Thursday, August 27th, 1818, and plied between that place and Buffalo until she went ashore in a storm in the fall of 1821.

The immediate successor to the Walk-in-the-Water was the steamboat Superior, and this boat was soon followed by others. The western fever had broken out in the East, and the tide of immigration set in shortly after these boats came to be used, and the fever did not subside until after the panic of 1837. There were no railroads, and the best way of reaching Michigan was by way of the Erie Canal, and thence by boat to Detroit. The boats were crowded during the entire period of navigation and new and larger steamers were added every season. It was estimated that the boats landed at the wharfs of Detroit one thousand strangers every day in the season of 1836, and probably as many or more the next year.

Everyone went wild with land speculation, and there were more boat accommodations for passengers in those years than there are at the present time,

though the elegant boats of that time would appear but as hovels compared with the floating palaces of to-day. It is not necessary, or perhaps profitable, to further follow the story of lake commerce.

I have said nothing of the ship-wrecks, the storms, the great losses that have occurred on these lakes from the launching of the Griffon to the present time. Millions of dollars of property and thousands of lives have been taken by these waters as a penalty for riding on their bosoms, but in spite of all discouragements, the lake carrying trade increases every year and has become the wonder of the world.

The tonnage that passes the locks at Sault Ste. Marie is more than double that which passes through the great Suez Canal, and all that passes through the Straits of Detroit exceeds many times that which enters the port of Liverpool.

After I had completed writing the foregoing I received a letter from your worthy Governor, which contained a clipping from the *Review of Reviews* in 1902, as follows :

“In 1899 there were more than 36,000,000 tons of freight carried through the St. Clair River. This seems large when it is stated by itself, but its real magnitude will perhaps better be appreciated when it is known it is 10,000,000 in excess of the tonnage of all the seaports in the United States for the same year, and 3,000,000 tons in excess of the total arrivals and clearances, both coastwise and foreign, of Liverpool and London combined.”



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